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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on second language (L2) learning through task-based interaction as well as the compatibility of the theories of task-based learning and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Language tasks encourage L2 learning by using language as a tool to accomplish a goal. This study analyzes the interaction of first-semester French students while performing a group task created according to criteria in recent research by Lee (2000). The task focused on a particular grammatical point of French. Students' group discussions and activities were recorded. Overall, task interpretation varied among groups (e.g., type of interaction, division of labor, use of English as a mediator, scaffolding, meta-task talk, and off-task talk). However, components of an effective task were apparent (interaction between form and meaning, real communication, interactive learning, later success, and positive classroom morale). The results indicate that Lee's suggestions for task-based classroom interaction are compatible with a Vygotskian framework for learning. Together they provide the theoretical and practical basis for the potential of tasks in the classroom. Two appendixes present the French and English versions of the class activity. (Author/SM)

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*Task Interpretation and Task Effectiveness: A Vygotskian Analysis of a French L2 Classroom Task**

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*Task Interpretation and Task Effectiveness: A Vygotskian Analysis of a French L2 Classroom Task**

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This paper focuses on second language learning through task-based interaction. Language tasks encourage L2 learning by using language as a tool to accomplish a goal. This study analyzes the interaction of first-semester French students while performing a group task created according to criteria in recent research by Lee. Task interpretation varied among groups including type of interaction, division of labor, use of English as a mediator, scaffolding, meta-task talk, and off-task talk. However, components of an effective task are apparent: interaction between form and meaning, real communication, interactive learning, later success, and positive classroom morale. Lee's suggestions for task-based classroom interaction are compatible with a Vygotskian framework for learning. Together they provide the theoretical and practical basis for the potential of tasks in the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on second language learning through task-based interaction as well as the compatibility of the theories of task-based language learning and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Vygotsky claims that learning occurs through interaction. Task-based learning is built on the premise that learning in the L2 occurs through interactional modifications; paired work and group work provide such an opportunity. The goal of this paper is to identify and explain the components of an effective language task. In order to accomplish this goal, a close examination of the interaction that occurs during the completion of a task from a Vygotskian perspective is presented.

Task-Based Learning

Lee (2000) proposes the use of language tasks in the foreign language classroom in an attempt to provide an arena for real communication. He rejects the typical classroom definition of communication where the teacher questions and students answer. This type of interaction provides no linguistic support yielding long moments of unproductive and uncomfortable silence. Lee therefore redefines communication as the "expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning" (p. 1). He calls for a more social view of communication; "to assert that language learners are communicating is to assert that they are given opportunities to say what they mean and to work toward a mutual understanding with other interlocutors" (p. 26). In order for real communication to occur in the classroom, the instructor should abandon the need for full control and allow students to interact on their own.

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Lee's answer to the need for communication in the classroom is the language task performed in groups. According to Lee, "the purpose of language use is to accomplish some task rather than to practice any particular language forms" (p. 12). Therefore, language tasks give an opportunity to use language in a more purposeful and natural way. In addition, "by completing tasks, learners use language as a means to an end" (p. 31). Tasks allow students to accomplish something with their language skills, no matter how basic they are. Lee believes that

> task-based activities address the shortcomings inherent in a classroom dynamic born out of the restricted definition that *communication = question & answer*. Task-based activities focused on problem solving, consensus building and interdependent group functioning not only promote the active participation of each individual class member but can be constructed in such a way as to provide learners varying degrees of linguistic support. (p. 33)

Therefore, Lee believes that tasks will allow the classroom to be more productive, interactive and certainly communicative.

Lee claims that the design of the task is essential for its success. He insists that not all task-based group work is helpful; it cannot be gratuitous, and should not contain loose or unconnected information. He gives the following components for structuring a good task:

1) Identify a desired informational outcome.
2) Break down the topic into subtopics.
3) Create and sequence concrete tasks for the learners to do, for example, create lists, fill in charts, make tables
4) Build in linguistic support, either lexical or grammatical or both. (pp. 35-36)

Thus the well-organized task encourages extended discourse in real-time on a certain topic with an information gap. Carefully structured tasks will encourage and support communication.

Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning

Lee briefly makes a reference to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory; indeed there are many components of Vygotsky's model of learning which are relevant to the discussion of task-based learning. Sociocultural theory is not unknown in the field of second language acquisition; there exist many direct and useful applications of the theory to the present discussion.

Learning Through Interaction

Vygotsky claims that learning occurs through interaction. According to Lantolf, (forthcoming) "sociocultural theory argues that while separate, thinking and speaking are tightly interrelated in a dialectic unity in which publicly derived speech completes privately initiated thought." In other words, social interaction leads to individual development. Therefore, group activities not only necessarily

encourage learning but provide a context for the indispensable element of interaction.

Activity Theory

Activity theory claims that motivation determines the realization of any task. Coughlin and Duff (1994) propose that the same task does not imply the same activity on the part of participants. They provide the useful distinctions between *task*, which is a behavioral blueprint, and *activity*, which is the behavior produced when an individual or group performs a task. They point out that

> participants have their own objectives, and act according to these and the researchers' objectives, all of which are negotiated. . . over the course of the interaction. Furthermore, activities have no inherent parameters or boundaries, except those imposed by the task and by the interpretations and expectations of the individuals involved in a given task. In a language-based activity, constraints on task performance might include the level of knowledge (cultural, linguistic) shared by the interactants, or the time and interest they are willing, or able, to invest in order to complete the task at hand. (p. 175)

Rogoff (1990) also points out that activities are interpreted and carried out in accordance with goals. Therefore, meaning and purpose are central in defining an activity. Activity theory thus may shed light on the implementation and evaluation of the success of tasks in the second language classroom.

Mediation

Another related element relevant to this discussion is the theory of mediation. In sociocultural theory, it is believed that the mind uses tools to mediate the world. An important method of mediation is talk. In order to regulate a task, students mediate the activity through speech. Anton and DiCamilla (1998) point out that the L1 is an important tool in mediation for second language learners. Therefore, the L1 is not to be feared in the L2 classroom. Indeed it may be constructively manipulated in certain contexts to encourage learning. Additionally, Brooks and Donato (1994) point out that "what might appear on the surface as non-relevant task talk is in fact mediating the participants' control over the language and procedures of the task, each other, and ultimately the self" (p. 271). The acts of mediation and regulation therefore serve as an important step toward learning.

Tasks and Sociocultural Theory

Studies that examine the compatibility of task-based learning and concepts of sociocultural theory make an important contribution to understanding how theory has practical application in the classroom. Brooks and Donato (1994) looked at tasks from a Vygotskian perspective and concluded that a language task is a cognitive activity, thereby justifying the application and relevance of Vygotsky in the present discussion. They point to the belief that tasks, rather than being ex-

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ternally defined, "are in fact internally constructed through the moment-to-moment verbal interactions of the learners during actual task performance" (p. 272). Therefore, students need to be given freedom in interaction so that they are able to regulate their own activity. This idea is very compatible with the beliefs of Lee who argues for the need to give learners control of their learning. It has been shown that students need to and will successfully regulate their learning under the right circumstances. Through interaction, they will justify and redefine the task, scaffold and communicate.

THE STUDY

Instrument

The researcher created a language task based on the criteria as proposed by Lee including a goal, topics and subtopics, sequenced tasks and linguistic support (See Appendices A and B). The task focused on a particular grammatical point of French, the *passé composé*, or the compound past. The goal and topic included discussion, comparison and categorization of activities of the class from the previous weekend. At the end of the discussion, the students were supposed to be able to report to the class whether their partner was "intellectual" "sporty" or "inactive" according to the kinds of activities they did. The task also contained a nice progression from input to output, including a related assignment for the next day.

Subjects

The subjects were 23 students of first semester French including 18 women and five men. These students had been doing similarly structured tasks throughout the semester. The students preformed the task in eight self-selected groups of two, three, or four. In most cases, the groups were of the same composition as many informal daily exercises.

Procedure

Each group of students recorded themselves for the entirety of the task. There were no specific instructions given on how to carry out the task (that is, the language used, the kinds of answers produced, the truth value involved, separate vs. group work etc.) except the written instructions. The in-class instructions by the researcher were paraphrases of the instructions on the worksheet. The researcher moderated the task entirely in French except while addressing individual group questions. The researcher did control movement from section to section by check-ups and further instructions. The total time for this task was approximately 20+ minutes.

TASK INTERPRETATION: ONE TASK, EIGHT (OR 23!) ACTIVITIES

The discussion that follows consists of a comparison of group interaction that occurred during completion of the task. The interpretation of the task is defined by the approaches taken for completion of the task. Each group had a different approach to the task, yet there were several common

themes and methods that were apparent in the interactions. Relevant components of sociocultural theory are incorporated where appropriate.

Structure of Group Interaction

An important element of task interpretation is how students organized their interaction. There appeared to be four major ways for groups to structure their interaction, and these are treated in the following subsections. It is important to note that if a group interaction needed adjustment, groups easily adopted a new way to interact. However, a single type of organization usually remained as a common element throughout the task.

Leader and Followers

A few groups organized their interaction along the lines of leader and followers.

Such an interaction, if present, was found in groups with more than two students. In the following interaction, K served as the leader, and M and E were involved followers.

Example 1

K: Elle a fait de l'aérobique, that would be sporty

E: [sportif]

K: [sportif] for aerobics. Elle a fini un livre, that would be intellectual, reading. Regarding the television, that would be couch potatoey

M: inactive

K: Elle a appris quelques phrases en italien. Okay, be intellectual I suppose

M: Yeah

Turn-Taking

Another type of organization may be labeled turn-taking. In this type of interaction, students created a neat division of labor and interacted by answering every other question. The following interaction exemplifies this sort of interaction; T and C shared the work.

Example 2

C: Um, elle a fait de l'aérobique, uh sportif

T: Elle a fini un livre, uh, intellectuel

C: Okay, elle a regardé la télé, unless she was watching some nature show or something, it's probably inactive

T: Um, elle a perdu son chien...sportif

Cooperative Production

The most common type of interaction was cooperative production where students completed almost every aspect of the interaction together. They constantly were engaged in negotiation of form and meaning in order to complete the task. For instance, in Part Two of the task, it was quite common for a group to compile the same activities for the entire group since they had developed them together. This type of organization is illustrated by Examples 3 and 4.

Example 3

M: We need to do something active.

Example 4

D: What else did we do this weekend?

Individual Production

A final common type of interaction was individual production marked by students producing many forms and coming to conclusions on their own when interaction was not required. The interaction between B and S typifies this category; there were moments of silence during the activity when they were self-regulating and completing individual work.

Task Regulation

This section examines the tools used by students in order to regulate the task given to them. These tools, used in varying proportions by the groups, served in important ways to regulate, modify, and complete the task.

Meta-Task Talk

A significant amount of time and effort in completing a task involved talking about the task. Groups discussed the goals and redefined the instructions of the task in order to make them internally relevant. Example 5 portrays the redefinition of instructions. It is important to note that this was done in English and in K's own words.

Example 5

K: Okay, all right. So we're deciding if these activities are sporty, intellectual or...inactive, couch potatoey things

Examples 6 and 7 reveal a commonplace and important discussion on discovering the grammatical point of concern in this task. The researcher did not explicitly point out in the instructions that the grammatical focus was on the *passé composé*.

Example 6

J: This is in the past tense, right?

Example 7

J: Oh wait, we're supposed to be doing this in past participles

The next example shows how a student regulated the group's formation of the *passé composé*. She realized that there is an auxiliary verb in this verb formation, however it was provided as part of the built-in linguistic support.

Example 8

C: We don't have to even mess with it referring to the helping verb)

A final type of meta-task talk included re-organization of the approach to the task. In the next example, J told D that he needed to participate in Part Three of the task by asking her what she did last weekend.

Example 9

J: Ask me!

Speech as Mediation

The entire language activity was obviously an exercise in speech as mediation. What is interesting in the context of a second language task is the interaction between L1 and L2 in completion of the task. The amount of L2 used in the interaction varied across groups. However, all students were consistent in their use of English in cases of meta-task talk, meta-linguistic talk, and evaluative comments. English was an important tool in creating, understanding and completing the grammar, the topic and the task. The example below exemplifies the use of English to talk about French grammar. Student D wanted to know if the preposition *au* went in between the verb *jouer* and the object *tennis*.

Example 10

D: Is it *au* between *joue* and *tennis*?

This particular utterance is interesting since it would be incomprehensible to most people outside this context.

Appeal to Other

During completion of this task, there were many instances of students appealing to each other for grammatical or lexical support. This kind of appeal typifies learning through interaction. All participating members of this task were students of approximately the same level, yet they were able to problem-solve and produce on their own. Example 11 demonstrates a typical request for meta-linguistic discussion.

Example 11

J: How do you make this into a past participle?

Example 12 provides a glimpse into the linguistic world of a first year French student. A translation of this sentence would be "The past participle of the French verb *travailler* is formed regularly, right?"

Example 12

J: It's just a normal verb *travailler*, right?

It is important to note that these appeals were acknowledged and subsequently resolved in the course of the interaction.

Scaffolding

In the group interactions, there were many instances of scaffolding, where students would negotiate meaning and form in order to come up with the right answer. The fascinating aspect of scaffolding is that students together were able to formulate an answer that none of them knew at the onset. This type of interaction allows a close-up view of the Zone of Proximal Development discussed in sociocultural theory. Students were learning to master the *passé composé* through communicative negotiation with their partners. Example 13 provides an excellent view of scaffolding as students K, E and M together came to an acceptable answer

by questioning, evaluating, and interacting.

Example 13

K: Elle a perdu son chien

E: Sportif? that if playing with your dog

K: Oh, playing with your dog, that would be [sportif]

E: [Or] what does perdre mean?

M: perdu

E: perdu?

K: I don't know

E: Something your dog

M: I'll look it up...to lose?

K: losing your dog?

M: Well, I guess

K: Are you sure chien is dog?

E: Yeah

K: Losing your dog, I don't know

E: Losing your dog is a sport. Dog, chien.

K: Losing your dog is a sport, FINDING your dog is a sport

M: perdu

E: Losing is too

K: All right, I'll put it down

In the above example, the students negotiated the form and meaning of the verb "perdre" as well as the noun "chien" in order to jointly come to a conclusion.

Off-Task Talk

There were many instances of "off-task" talk during its completion. However, it was always inspired by the content of the task itself and never lasted more than a few seconds. The ordered and productive design of the task required students to return to task in a short time. In Example 14, J and M were completing Part Two of the task.

Example 14

M: I went dancing.

J: You went dancing? Where did you go dancing?

M: Bob Popular's

In Example 15, C remarked on the inactive nature of his weekend while completing Part Four of the task.

Example 15

C: I would have said one active thing, but I didn't know how to say carried a T.V. all around campus.

T: Why did you carry a T.V. over campus?

C: We had this thing for a club I'm in...

TASK EFFECTIVENESS: SUGGESTIONS FOR A DEFINITION

The goal of this section is to discuss the elements of a task that may contribute to its effectiveness in the second language classroom. First the drawbacks of tasks will be ad-

dressed followed by a compilation of potential advantages.

Task Drawbacks

There are, of course, many possible drawbacks to task-based learning which need to be addressed in order to assess their role in the classroom. Tasks take up a considerable amount of classtime. During this time, the instructor has certainly lost control of the classroom interaction. Therefore, wrong answers and conclusions may be formulated and believed. There also appears to be a considerable amount of L1 used in the lengthy interaction. In addition, the group task activity may promote "off-task" talk. These objections are not without merit, however, the time spent allowing students to negotiate meaning and interaction, according to Vygotsky, represent an essential component of cognition which is necessary for language acquisition.

Form and Meaning

This task displays an interdependence of form and meaning built into the task. Students were forced to manipulate the *passé composé* and then evaluate it. By the design of this task, it was impossible to only focus on form without attention to meaning. The next example shows an evaluation of meaning after proper production of the form by the question proposed by T and the humorous response by C.

Example 16

T: **J'ai mangé... inactif?**

C: **Inactive unless you were shoveling it in your mouth**

Communication

New information was shared with the entirety of the class. By design of the task, students were forced to communicate in order to be able to comment on the weekend of their partners. Most of the students were classified as inactive by their partners. The communicative value of the *passé composé* was also reinforced since students had to describe what they did.

Example 17

T: **We did all inactive things**

Activity Construction

This task allowed students the freedom to interpret the activity according to their own needs and motivations. There is a delicate balance to be found between providing enough support and direction for interaction and conversely, enough freedom to create a unique learning situation. The question arises, why did students structure the activity as they did? It appears that students understood their own needs and worked accordingly. For example, students who had not yet internalized the formation of the *passé composé* engaged in much more interactive meta-linguistic discussions on form than those who were more self-regulated.

Learning Through Interaction

Scaffolding was an important aspect of the interaction during this task. In fact, the design of the task en-

couraged scaffolding by peers. In this activity, there were many lexical realizations as well as understandings of grammatical forms prompted by the interactive demands.

Later Success

Does the type of interaction predict later success? A certain type of interaction did not appear to correlate with later success. However, this is not to say that how a task is approached doesn't affect later success. Negotiation of form and meaning and meta-linguistic talk are important aspects of internalizing language. In addition, English appears to be a help rather than a hindrance for later success. The follow-up homework highlighted the general success of the task. Students reacted to the in-class task and then they revealed their level of mastery of the *passé composé*. The task created an opportunity for communicative homework as well.

Class Morale

The emotive clues indicated that the students enjoyed task-structured communication. During the interaction, there were many instances of laughter, varied intonation and evaluative remarks such as "oh, oh!". Most students became engaged in the interaction because they were talking about something relevant to their lives. It appears that they enjoy putting their partners into categories and comparing the categorization of the class. Consistent with the conclusions of Brooks and Donato (1994), it appears that "off-task talk" is natural. It enhances the experience and it imitates real communication. It would stifle natural tendencies if follow-up commentary were not permitted.

CONCLUSION

Would Vygotsky and Lee approve? Vygotsky would probably consider these tasks as a real-life application of mediated and interactional learning in the foreign language classroom. Students are given the opportunity to talk out formation and meaning. By interacting, they run into problems, issues and questions they would not have come upon on their own.

Do tasks do what they are supposed to do according to Lee? Lee provides a suggestion for classroom practice based on observations of the workings of the L2 classroom for which there is much theoretical support in Vygotsky's general theory of language. In the present study, there was indeed communication as defined by the "expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning" (p. 1). There are probably elements of the task not envisioned by Lee that played a major role in their realization. Use of L1 in a supposed L2 language task was widespread, but English was used purposefully in carrying out expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning. However, contrary to the vision of Lee, the language was used to accomplish a task and to practice forms. It seems unrealistic to not provide a form basis for any topic in a university foreign language classroom.

What makes a good task? What makes a task good? Sociocultural the-

ory would explain their success by the fact that students are able to create their own interaction by a carefully structured and ordered task that takes into account their need for linguistic support, their grammatical competence and interests. The bottom line is that in a language task there are many formal linguistic realizations, occasions for practice, fun, and communication. Students are given the opportunity to see relevance and authenticity of the language they are learning by means of communication.

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APPENDIX A
Sportif, intellectuel, ou inactif?

I. Voici les activités de votre prof le week-end passé. Avec un partenaire, classez les activités suivantes:

elle a fait de l'aérobique	sportif.....intellectuel.....inactif
elle a fini un livre	sportif.....intellectuel.....inactif
elle a regardé la télé	sportif.....intellectuel.....inactif
elle a perdu son chien	sportif.....intellectuel.....inactif
elle a appris quelques phrases en italien	sportif.....intellectuel.....inactif

Partagez vos réponses avec la classe. Comment est-ce que vous classez l'ensemble de ces activités?

II. Ajoutez quatre activités de votre week-end et indiquez la catégorie. Justifiez vos réponses.

j'ai	sportif.....intellectuel.....inactif
j'ai	sportif.....intellectuel.....inactif
j'ai	sportif.....intellectuel.....inactif
j'ai	sportif.....intellectuel.....inactif

III. Interviewez votre partenaire sur ses activités et puis indiquez la catégorie.
Modèle: *Qu'est-ce que tu as fait ce week-end?*
J'ai joué aux cartes.

il/elle a	sportif.....intellectuel.....inactif
il/elle a	sportif.....intellectuel.....inactif
il/elle a	sportif.....intellectuel.....inactif
il/elle a	sportif.....intellectuel.....inactif

IV. Est-ce que votre partenaire semble plutôt sportif(-ve), intellectuel(-le), ou inactif(-ve)?
Modèle: *Mon partenaire est plutôt sportif parce qu'il a joué au football samedi matin et il a fait du jogging dimanche après-midi.*

Partagez vos réponses avec la classe. Chacun met son partenaire dans une catégorie.

sportif/sportive	intellectuel(-le)	inactif/inactive

Quelle catégorie décrit le mieux le week-end passé de l'ensemble de la classe?

V. DEVOIRS pour demain

Est-ce que vous êtes d'accord avec votre partenaire? Ecrivez 6 phrases sur votre week-end passé.

APPENDIX B
Sporty, Intellectual, or Inactive?

I. Here are the activities of your teacher last weekend. With a partner, classify the following activities:

she did aerobics	sporty.....intellectual.....inactive
she finished a book	sporty.....intellectual.....inactive
she watched television	sporty.....intellectual.....inactive
she lost her dog	sporty.....intellectual.....inactive
she learned a few phrases in Italian	sporty.....intellectual.....inactive

Share your answers with the class. How did you classify most of these activities?

II. Add four activities from your weekend and indicate the category. Justify your responses.

I	sporty.....intellectual.....inactive
I	sporty.....intellectual.....inactive
I	sporty.....intellectual.....inactive
I	sporty.....intellectual.....inactive

III. Interview your partner about his/her activities and then indicate the category.
Model: *What did you do this weekend?*
I played cards.

he/she	sporty.....intellectual.....inactive
he/she	sporty.....intellectual.....inactive
he/she	sporty.....intellectual.....inactive
he/she	sporty.....intellectual.....inactive

IV. Does your partner seem more sporty, intellectual or inactive?
Model: *My partner is more sporty because he played football Saturday morning and he went jogging Sunday afternoon.*

Share your responses with the class. Each person should put his/her partner in a category.

sporty	intellectual	inactive

Which category best describes the class as a whole?

V. HOMEWORK for tomorrow
Do you agree with your partner? Write 6 sentences about last weekend.

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